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Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from 1 January to 30 June 2018 and provides an overview of developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel. It also outlines the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and progress made in the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel. In addition, it provides an update on the situation in the Lake Chad basin, pursuant to Security Council resolution 2349 (2017).

II. Developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel

2. During the reporting period, the peace and security landscape in West Africa and the Sahel continued to be dominated by the security situations in Mali, Nigeria and the Niger and by rising insecurity in Burkina Faso. Throughout the Sahel, violent conflicts between nomadic herders and sedentary agrarian communities increased in frequency, intensity, complexity and geographic scope. Moreover, the growing threat of cross-border armed groups and transnational organized crime continued to be compounded by weak State institutions and the inadequate provision of public services.

3. At the same time, major milestones were achieved as peaceful democratic transitions occurred in Liberia and Sierra Leone and local elections were held in the Gambia. However, post-electoral violence in Guinea, a breakdown in dialogue in the Niger, the slow pace of the dialogue process to resolve the constitutional crisis in Togo and increasing tensions surrounding upcoming elections in a number of countries are reminders of the fragility of democratic gains in the region. Moreover, while macroeconomic growth has generally improved, it has not yet translated into the implementation of meaningful democratic reforms.

A. Political and governance trends

4. In Burkina Faso, the trial of 84 individuals implicated in the coup attempt of 16 September 2015 began on 27 February 2018. Slow progress has been made in the proceedings and they have been repeatedly adjourned, in part due to procedural concerns raised by the defendants. During the reporting period, social tensions intensified as workers' strikes increased in various public service sectors.

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5. In Côte d'Ivoire, elections for 66 of the 99 senators in the upper chamber of Parliament took place on 24 March without the participation of the opposition, who boycotted the process. In line with his constitutional prerogatives, the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Dramane Ouattara, should appoint the remaining 33 senators. The Senate held its inaugural session on 5 April, during which the former Minister of State for Political Dialogue and Relations with Institutions, Jeannot Ahoussou-Kouadio, was elected as its President. On 12 April, the six members of the ruling coalition signed an agreement to form a unified political party to be called Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix. It has not yet been endorsed by all the members of the coalition.

6. The Gambia held peaceful local and municipal elections on 12 April and 12 May, respectively. All parties in the ruling coalition competed in their individual capacities. The United Democratic Party, led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ousainou Darboe, won the majority of seats, while the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction of former President Yahya Jammeh obtained less than 15 per cent of seats. Meanwhile, the Government has continued to make progress in a number of reform processes, including in the areas of security sector reform and transitional justice.

7. Local elections held in Guinea on 4 February took place in a relatively stable environment. However, the results were strongly contested by opposition parties, who took to the streets in protest, which resulted in at least 12 fatalities. On 16 May, the leader of the opposition, Cellou Dalein Diallo, announced the suspension of demonstrations. He stated, however, that the opposition would continue to boycott the follow-up committee established pursuant to the political agreement of 12 October 2016, citing the slow progress made in the resolution of disagreements related to the local elections. Following the resignation of the former Prime Minister, Mamady Youla, on 21 May, the President of Guinea, Alpha Condé, appointed Ibrahima Kassory Fofana as the new Prime Minister.

8. In Liberia, George Manneh Weah was sworn in as President on 22 January. His inauguration marked the first time in the history of Liberia that power was transferred from an elected President to an elected successor. Preparations for senatorial by-elections in Bong and Montserrado counties to fill the vacated seats of Mr. Weah and Vice-President Jewel Howard Taylor continued during the reporting period. Meanwhile, on 25 April, the Government agreed to reduce the salaries of ministers and Government officials.

9. On 26 February, the President of Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, announced that he would not run for a third term in the presidential election to be held in 2019. Subsequently, the main opposition actors declared their intention to participate in regional and legislative elections set for the second half of 2018, contrary to their previous decision to boycott the polls. On 13 May, opposition groups and civil society members held a demonstration in Nouakchott calling for the dissolution of the Independent National Electoral Commission. Former Senator and member of the opposition, Mohamed Ould Ghadda, who was arrested in August 2017 on corruption charges, remained in prison without trial.

10. The situation in the Niger remained tense owing to a breakdown in political dialogue between the Government and the opposition and popular discontent over difficult socio-economic conditions. On 25 March, protesters held a demonstration in Niamey over the 2018 finance law, living conditions and the presence of foreign troops on Nigerien soil. The protest resulted in clashes with security forces and the arrest of 26 civil society leaders.

11. In Nigeria, political developments centred on preparations for presidential and parliamentary elections set to take place in February 2019. On 9 April, the President,

Muhammadu Buhari, declared his intention to run for a second term. Former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar also announced his candidacy for the presidential election. A demand made by the House of Representatives in April, following an increase in violence in the Middle Belt and the north of the country, to dismiss national service chiefs and security advisers, has not been carried out. In addition, the decision of the National Assembly to summon Mr. Buhari to provide a briefing on the increased insecurity in the country prompted a debate on whether the legislature had such power over the executive. Meanwhile, the signing into law of a "not too young to run" bill, which will reduce the age limits set for candidates for elected positions, and the adoption of the Electoral Act amendment, which will regulate the general elections, are still pending.

12. In Senegal, preparations for the presidential election, to be held on 24 February 2019, continued against a backdrop of increasing mistrust between the Government and the opposition. On 19 April 2018, the Senegalese Parliament adopted a bill amending the electoral code that requires all presidential candidates to collect supporting signatures from 0.8 per cent of registered voters in at least 7 of the country's 14 regions. The opposition boycotted the vote on the bill on the grounds that it was designed to exclude potential presidential contenders. They also called for a neutral and independent electoral body to manage the election. On 30 March, the Mayor of Dakar and potential presidential contender in the 2019 election, Khalifa Sall, was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement of public funds.

13. On 7 March, Sierra Leone held its first presidential, legislative and local elections without the presence of a United Nations mission in the country. The process was marked by tensions and multiple legal challenges related to the eligibility of some presidential candidates and to an injunction postponing the second round of the presidential election, which eventually took place on 31 March. Electoral observer missions, including from the African Union, the European Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), reported that the polls were professionally organized, credible and largely peaceful. The candidate of the former opposition Sierra Leone People's Party, Julius Maada Bio, was elected President and was sworn in on 4 April, marking a peaceful transfer of power after 10 years of rule by the All People's Congress. The latter secured a majority in Parliament with 68 seats, while the Sierra Leone People's Party won 49 seats. The remaining 29 seats were filled by representatives of smaller political parties and independents. Parliament held its inaugural session on 25 April and elected as its Speaker Abass Bundu of the Sierra Leone People's Party. The vote was conducted in the absence of the Members of Parliament belonging to the All People's Congress, who walked out of the plenary to protest the imposition of injunctions against 15 of their Members of Parliament. Following coordinated interventions by ECOWAS and the United Nations, and the resumption of dialogue between the two main parties, all parliamentarians were sworn in on 4 May. The President was inaugurated on 12 May.

14. The inter-Togolese political dialogue started on 19 February under the facilitation of the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, with the support of the President of Guinea, Alpha Condé. Following a deadlock during its third session on 25 March, the dialogue was adjourned. At the Extraordinary Summit of the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, held in Lomé on 14 April, Mr. Akufo-Addo and Mr. Condé were formally designated as ECOWAS facilitators for the dialogue. During the period under review, disagreements between national authorities and the opposition on the conduct of street demonstrations also contributed to increasing tensions.

B. Security trends

15. The security situation in West Africa was dominated by insecurity in the Sahel and Lake Chad basin regions. Asymmetrical terrorist attacks were carried out against national and international security forces, local authorities and civilians in Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria. Violent extremist armed groups continued to harass civilians, carry out targeted abductions or killings of suspected informants or local representatives of States, burn down schools and threaten teaching staff. There was also an increase in clashes between farmers and herders, particularly in Ghana, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria.

16. In Nigeria, multiple clashes between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt states, as well as in the southern states of Edo, Ebonyi and Kogi, resulted in numerous casualties, population displacement and destruction of property. The ongoing detention of the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Sheikh Ibraheem Zakzaky, continued to trigger protests. While incidents of violence decreased in the Niger Delta and south-east regions, militant groups threatened to resume attacks.

17. Burkina Faso continued to face attacks along the Malian border from Islamist militant groups such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, while militants from Islamic State in the Greater Sahara continued to cross over into the country from the Niger. In Ouagadougou, on 2 March, twin attacks claimed by the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims against the military staff building and the French embassy killed at least 8 people and injured approximately 80 others. Ansar al-Islam also carried out repeated attacks against security forces and civilians in the northern province of Soum. Attacks have increasingly been reported in previously unaffected areas, raising concerns of spillover to other regions of the country.

18. In the Niger, the presence of non-State armed groups continued to grow in the western region of Tillabéri, where militants affiliated with Islamic State in the Greater Sahara conducted attacks against security services and other targets. Attacks against humanitarian workers have continued, as evidenced by the kidnapping of an international aid worker on the Malian border in April and repeated reports of theft of vehicles in the western and southern regions of the Niger. While there have been fewer reported attacks by Boko Haram's "Islamic State's West African Province" faction in the Diffa region, violent criminal activities have been on the rise.

19. There is growing concern that West African and Sahelian Islamist groups are reinforcing their regional linkages, given the surge in the complexity and lethality of attacks in recent months and the increasing use of improvised explosive devices in Burkina Faso and the Niger. On 7 April, the High Court of Dakar started the trial of 30 people from Senegal accused of preparing terrorist attacks and setting up local terrorist cells in southern Senegal, which would be capable of piloting attacks throughout the region. According to their testimonies, several members of the group had received training from Boko Haram in Nigeria.

20. Piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea increased during the reporting period. In early April, the International Maritime Bureau reported 29 incidents in the first quarter of 2018 in the Gulf of Guinea (40 per cent of all attacks recorded worldwide), compared with 7 in the same area in the first quarter of 2017. Of the 29 recorded incidents, 22 were off the coast of Nigeria. Criminal groups increasingly resorted to hostage-taking: 113 of 114 kidnappings worldwide recorded in the first quarter of 2018 took place in the Gulf of Guinea. Drug smuggling and trafficking of small arms and light weapons, carried out partly by terrorist groups, continued to pose serious challenges in the subregion. Large seizures of methamphetamine trafficked by organized crime groups were recorded in various countries. Cattle rustling added

to insecurity in the north-western states of Nigeria, while armed banditry was a concern in the Agadez and Maradi regions of the Niger.

Boko Haram

21. During the reporting period, there was an overall decrease in attacks attributed to Boko Haram in the Niger, while Nigeria witnessed an increase in the scope and number of attacks. The group increased its attacks against civilian soft targets, including internally displaced persons and humanitarian workers. Female suicide bombers carried out a significant number of the attacks. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), nearly one in every five suicide bombers in Nigeria is a child, and girls account for 75 per cent of all child suicide bombers.

22. The Nigerian armed forces, supported by the Multinational Joint Task Force, reportedly pushed Boko Haram out of several areas in north-eastern Nigeria. However, the group continued to launch deadly attacks and remained a significant threat. Since the beginning of 2018, Boko Haram is believed to have been responsible for more than 90 attacks, resulting in at least 260 casualties in Nigeria alone.

23. On 19 February, militants from Boko Haram's "Islamic State's West African Province" faction seized 112 schoolgirls and 1 boy from the town of Dapchi, Yobe State, Nigeria. The incident was followed by a string of attacks, including on 1 March in Rann, Borno State, where Boko Haram militants killed eight security personnel and three United Nations-contracted aid workers. That led to the temporary suspension of relief work in an area hosting some 55,000 internally displaced persons and the indefinite closure of all boarding schools in Borno State. On 21 March, the Nigerian Government announced that it had brokered a temporary ceasefire with the Boko Haram faction, leading to the release of 105 of the girls abducted from Dapchi. Negotiations with the group continued during the reporting period, with the President of Nigeria offering amnesty to all insurgents who agree to lay down their arms.

24. Meanwhile, the Niger and Nigeria, through the Multinational Joint Task Force, stepped up activities to reduce the operational capacities and the geographic reach of Boko Haram. During the months of April and May, the Task Force made significant gains against Boko Haram, and official reports announced that 59 militants had been killed and 5 leaders had been captured, and 1,000 hostages, mainly women and children, had been rescued in Borno State, Nigeria. During those operations, 22 soldiers of the Task Force lost their lives and 75 were injured. On 27 April, the Commander of the Task Force announced that the high rate of casualties was largely due to indirect fire and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.

C. Socioeconomic trends

25. The overall macroeconomic outlook for West Africa remained positive. According to a report released by the African Development Bank on 12 March, economies in West Africa have rebounded from the slump in commodity prices. The Bank noted that overall economic growth in the subregion should reach 3.6 per cent in 2018 and 3.8 per cent in 2019 due to an increase in oil and agricultural production and the rising prices of some natural resources. Benin, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Togo are projected to grow at a rate of 5 per cent or more. As a result, the region-wide ratio between debt and gross domestic product is expected to improve. In its report, the African Development Bank also noted that income inequality remained high across the region. In an effort to maximize the benefits of financial regional cooperation, all West African countries, with the exception of Nigeria, became

signatories to the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement at a signing ceremony in Kigali on 21 March.

26. In the Sahel subregion, unemployment, inequality and a lack of opportunities continue to threaten stability. In its study on the socioeconomic prospects for the Sahel, the Economic Commission for Africa points to the need to address the root causes of the crisis to ensure the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and unlock opportunities for investment. The United Nations support plan for the Sahel seeks to assist countries in the region to spur growth through economic investment, develop human capital and resilience, improve the provision of basic services and consolidate peacebuilding and governance efforts.

D. Humanitarian trends

27. The humanitarian situation in parts of West Africa and the Sahel remained critical, mainly due to food insecurity, forced displacements and chronic vulnerability to external shocks. Around 20 per cent of people requiring relief assistance worldwide reside in West Africa and Sahel. The immediate outlook remains challenging owing to sustained climate variabilities and persistent insecurity.

28. In the Lake Chad basin area, which has been affected by extreme climatic conditions, 4 million people are currently classified as facing food insecurity, down from 7 million during the same period in 2017. Some 4.7 million people are projected to face severe food insecurity in the approaching lean season in the area, mainly due to ongoing conflict and security issues. The continued shrinking of Lake Chad has decreased the resilience and adaptive ability of populations to cope with humanitarian shocks and exacerbated competition over scant resources. In addition, shortages of land, pasture and water have led to the forced migration of pastoralist communities in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger, putting 2.5 million people at risk of a livelihood crisis in 2018 in the affected areas. Across the Sahel, some 6.9 million people, 3.7 million of them in north-eastern Nigeria alone, are in food crisis. Without assistance, the figure could rise to 10.2 million between June and August, while the number of malnourished children in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger and Senegal is likely to increase from 1.1 million to 1.6 million.

29. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat, during the reporting period the number of displaced persons across the Lake Chad basin region was 2.3 million, including 1.7 million internally displaced persons in north-east Nigeria, where food insecurity and malnutrition remained high. Despite a decline in some areas, insecurity and instability continued to drive displacement across many areas in the subregion. The conflict in Mali increasingly affected border regions in Burkina Faso and the Niger, displacing thousands of families. Intercommunity clashes in the Ménaka region of Mali have led 3,000 people to flee from Mali to Burkina Faso since February, adding to the 24,000 Malian refugees in that country since 2012. The total number of Malian refugees in neighbouring countries was estimated at 137,700 as at 30 April 2018. In the Niger, more than 11,500 people have been uprooted by violence in the western Tillabéri region since December 2017.

30. While humanitarian assistance has enabled the maintenance of livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people in Mali, aid workers have been hit by a spate of attacks and robberies, forcing some agencies to suspend operations. From January through April 2018, approximately 76 such security incidents were recorded in northern and central Mali, compared with 42 incidents for the same period in 2017. In Nigeria, an attack in Rann, Borno State, on 3 March resulted in three aid workers killed and three others abducted.

31. North-east Nigeria grappled with two cholera outbreaks in Borno State in February and Yobe State in March, even though case numbers have dropped in comparison with the previous period. Nigeria was also affected by an outbreak of Lassa fever, with nearly 2,000 suspected cases across 21 states.

32. Humanitarian organizations have requested $1.6 billion for 2018 to ease hunger and provide water, health care and education, and to help communities rebuild their livelihoods in the Lake Chad basin area. Humanitarian appeals have also been issued for Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. However, humanitarian response across the region remains critically underfunded.

E. Trends on human rights

33. The period under review saw a number of judicial proceedings involving prominent political actors, a series of demonstrations conducted in a number of countries and incremental progress made in promoting transitional justice. In some countries, judicial proceedings were perceived as targeting political opponents and triggered concerns about a possible politicization of the justice system. Allegations of infringements on the freedoms of assembly and expression were brought by opposition, civil society, trade union and other groups in a number of countries, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, the Niger, Senegal and Togo.

34. In the Gambia, Baba Galleh Jallow was appointed as Executive Director of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission on 5 March. In Mauritania, in March and April, the Special Tribunal in Nouadhibou sentenced three people to prison terms ranging from 10 to 20 years for acts of slavery. The Special Tribunal in Nouakchott sentenced three people to one year in prison for acts of slavery. One case was appealed and is still pending. In Guinea, a steering committee comprising national and international stakeholders was set up by the Minister for Justice in April to facilitate the organization of the trial of alleged perpetrators of the 28 September 2009 stadium massacre in Conakry.

35. In relation to accountability for terrorism-related crimes, a Nigerian court sentenced more than 200 people, including kidnappers of the girls from Chibok in 2014, to prison terms of up to 30 years, and released 475 others due to lack of evidence. In N'Djamena, from 10 to 13 April, the African Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the United Nations organized a workshop that developed a regional strategy for the screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of persons associated with Boko Haram in Lake Chad basin countries. The workshop was a follow-up to the Regional Stabilization Conference for the Lake Chad Region held in N'Djamena from 2 to 4 November 2017, during which all stakeholders agreed to draft a regional stabilization strategy for the Lake Chad region.

F. Trends on gender issues

36. The representation of women in senior government positions remained low. In the new Cabinet of Liberia, only 2 of the 19 ministers are women. Similarly, the Government formed on 25 April in Guinea-Bissau counts only 4 women among its 26 members. Following legislative elections in Sierra Leone on 7 March, the number of female members in the new Parliament remained at 12.8 per cent, which is half of the sub-Saharan African and worldwide average. In the local elections held in Guinea on 4 February, 20 per cent of the candidates were women.

37. Meanwhile, countries of the subregion maintained efforts to promote women's participation in peacebuilding processes. On 22 March, Togo validated its revised national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions for the period 2018–2022. In addition, on 26 and 27 February, Ghana held a consultation workshop to review its national action plan on Council resolution 1325 (2000).

III. Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

A. Good offices and special assignments by my Special Representative

38. My Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel continued to support efforts to sustain peace in the region, in collaboration with regional and international partners, by promoting and supporting inclusive national political dialogues, constitutional and democratic reforms and transparent, credible and peaceful elections.

39. My Special Representative and the President of the ECOWAS Commission, Jean-Claude Brou, met on 20 March and reaffirmed their commitment to maximizing synergies between ECOWAS and UNOWAS, particularly in relation to upcoming elections in a number of countries, the issue of transhumance and the crises in Guinea-Bissau and Togo. He also pursued consultations with the Chair of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, President Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé of Togo, on 20 April, with a focus on democratic and constitutional processes and deepening regional cooperation. In addition to consultations with other leaders, my Special Representative paid a visit on 7 April to the President of Guinea, Alpha Condé, in the latter's capacity as ECOWAS mediator on Guinea-Bissau.

40. My Special Representative contributed to building consensus in support of a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Togo. In that effort, he assisted in facilitating the deployment of a team of United Nations experts to provide advisory support to the facilitation and mediation efforts of the President of Ghana. He also held regular consultations with the Presidents of Ghana, Guinea and Togo, as well as with other international and local stakeholders, with a view to expediting the dialogue process.

41. As part of my initiative to sustain peace, my Special Representative paid particular attention to the transition process in the Gambia. From 15 to 18 February, he undertook a mission to Banjul, encouraging consensus over the tenure of the President, Adama Barrow, in line with the Constitution. He assured interlocutors of the commitment of the United Nations to consolidate peace in the country. On 18 February, he attended the country's national day celebrations. In addition, from 18 to 27 April UNOWAS participated in a mission led by the Peacebuilding Support Office to advance the implementation of the initiative to sustain peace. On 20 February, my Special Representative participated in a meeting in Dakar with international partners to promote the national development plan of the Gambia. He also participated in the donor round table conference on the Gambia held in Brussels on 22 May, during which approximately €1.45 billion was pledged by donors in support of the development plan.

42. Following the terrorist attack on 2 March, my Special Representative visited Ouagadougou on 3 and 4 March to meet with the President of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, and with representatives of the Government and civil society. During his meetings, he conveyed my deepest sympathies and the strong solidarity of the United Nations, as well as our firm condemnation of the terrorist act. He also emphasized the importance of bringing the perpetrators to justice, as well as carrying

on with critical ongoing justice processes. In the course of the mission, he met with the Chair of the ECOWAS Authority to exchange views on the political and security situation in the country.

43. The engagement of my Special Representative contributed to ensuring a peaceful conclusion to the presidential election in Sierra Leone, where he was present during both rounds. In close collaboration with the former Presidents of Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and South Africa, who were leading observer missions of the Commonwealth, ECOWAS, the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa and the African Union, respectively, he mediated disputes which threatened to escalate and possibly derail the process. The joint negotiations resulted in an agreement to resume the tabulation of results, which had been suspended during the second round of the presidential election. He conducted another mission to Sierra Leone with the President of the ECOWAS Commission from 27 to 30 April. Their coordinated intervention contributed to lowering tensions following the election of the Speaker of Parliament and facilitated the subsequent swearing-in of the All People's Congress Members of Parliament. He returned to Freetown on 12 May to attend the inauguration of the President of Sierra Leone.

44. My Special Representative also attended the inauguration of the President of Liberia on 22 January. He returned to Monrovia on 21 and 22 March, with the Deputy Secretary-General, to witness the closing ceremony of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). During the visit, they engaged in discussions with national and international stakeholders on the transition process and on the continuation of United Nations support to Liberia, including through the United Nations country team and a reinforced Resident Coordinator's office.

45. Cognizant of the politically active environment ahead of the Nigerian polls in 2019, he conducted consultations with political and religious leaders in Abuja from 18 to 21 March. National stakeholders concurred on the need for the full reactivation of the National Peace Committee of Nigeria, which had been instrumental in facilitating dialogue prior to the country's elections in 2015.

46. Following the local elections in Guinea, my Special Representative undertook two missions to Conakry. During his visit of 7 and 8 February, accompanied by the ECOWAS Ambassador to Guinea, he held consultations with the Independent National Electoral Commission and representatives of the Government and opposition, the diplomatic community and others, urging for calm and recourse to legal means to settle electoral-related disputes. On 7 March, he met with the President to, inter alia, underscore the need to accelerate implementation of the political agreement of 12 October 2016.

47. My Special Representative conducted a good offices mission to the Niger from 23 to 25 April. In his consultations with national stakeholders, he emphasized the need to lay the basis for an inclusive and constructive dialogue. From 21 to 27 May, he dispatched a fact-finding mission to Nouakchott to evaluate the peace and stability situation in the country ahead of the upcoming legislative, municipal and regional elections.

48. In continuation of his regular efforts at supporting coherence and cooperation among United Nations actors, on 5 March my Special Representative chaired the 32nd high-level meeting of the heads of United Nations missions in West Africa and the Sahel, which was held in Bamako. The meeting was attended by my Special Representatives for Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali and Central Africa, as well as by the Resident Coordinator for Côte d'Ivoire. On 12 and 13 April, my Special Representative shared regional experiences on conflict prevention at a retreat organized in New York by the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research.

More generally, he continued his regular consultations with members of the diplomatic community and his participation in regional workshops and conferences.

B. Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission

49. Insecurity in areas affected by Boko Haram continued to hinder the activities of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission in the northernmost regions of the land boundary between the two countries. Social and political unrest in the English-speaking north-western and south-western regions of Cameroon raised additional security concerns. As a result, the demarcation of the border and the subsequent emplacement of pillars continued to be a challenge. Against that background, the parties to the Mixed Commission met in Lagos, Nigeria, on 19 and 20 March to finalize the implementation of reinforced security measures for field operations.

50. On 18 March in Abuja, and on 15 May in Yaoundé, my Special Representative, who also serves as Chair of the Mixed Commission, engaged in bilateral consultations with the heads of the Nigerian and Cameroonian delegations to work on outstanding areas of disagreement. Overall, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the judgment of the International Court of Justice of October 2002 and to fully demarcating the land and maritime boundaries shared by the two countries.

51. My Special Representative also successfully concluded fundraising efforts to replenish a trust fund for pillar construction along the land boundary. Consequently, pillar emplacement is expected to resume in October 2018, at the end of the rainy season.

C. Enhancing subregional capacities to address cross-border and cross-cutting threats to peace and security

Security sector reform

52. UNOWAS continued supporting countries of the subregion in their efforts to conduct security sector reform. In Burkina Faso, the security sector reform process was scaled up during the reporting period. The Senior Security Sector Reform Adviser deployed by the United Nations supported the completion of a needs assessment in March and the compilation and prioritization of recommendations emanating from the national forum on security held in October 2017. The Government reached consensus with regard to the establishment of institutional mechanisms for the reform process.

53. In the Gambia, security sector reform was affected by challenges related to strategic direction and national coordination. A security sector assessment was undertaken by the national working group on security sector reform, with the support of the United Nations, and was endorsed by the Government in February. Subsequently, the first meeting of the security sector reform steering committee took place on 18 April. The meeting was chaired by the Vice-President of the Gambia and established next steps in the reform process. The United Nations continued to provide advice and technical support to the authorities, while liaising with partners to improve coordination.

54. In Guinea, the United Nations advisory team continued to assist the Government in strengthening oversight mechanisms and creating units responsible for dealing with gender issues within the defence and security forces. The Conseil supérieur de défense nationale became increasingly operational, thus allowing for the team's eventual departure.

Conflicts between herders and farmers

55. During the reporting period, UNOWAS supported the ECOWAS Commission in the development of a regional action plan on transhumance. The Office also established an informal working group on pastoralism and conflict prevention with the participation of the United Nations and regional entities working on the issue.

56. In Libreville, on 10 and 11 April, UNOWAS and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) organized a meeting to share knowledge and experience on conflict analysis and pastoralism. During the meeting, UNOWAS shared the findings of its study on pastoralism and security in West Africa and the Sahel. In addition, UNOCA and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) agreed to conduct joint analyses in 2018.

57. In Abuja, from 24 to 26 April, UNOWAS participated in a ministerial and experts meeting on conflicts between herders and farmers in West Africa, organized by the ECOWAS Commission and the Government of Nigeria. Relevant recommendations included the need for States to report on the implementation of the ECOWAS transhumance protocol.

Boko Haram

58. My Special Representative continued to support diplomatic, security and humanitarian responses to Boko Haram. He also focused efforts on facilitating an agreement for the holding of a joint summit of ECOWAS and ECCAS, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 2349 (2017). In that context, my Special Representatives for West Africa and the Sahel and for Central Africa participated in the meeting of ECOWAS-ECCAS Ministers for Foreign Affairs on 20 April in Lomé, which resulted in an agreement to convene an interregional summit in July 2018, to coincide with the ECOWAS Summit of Heads of State and Government. The Chairs of ECOWAS and ECCAS (the President of Togo and the President of Gabon, respectively), welcomed an offer of United Nations support to the forum.

59. On 28 February, my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel took part in the International Conference on Lake Chad hosted by the Government of Nigeria with the support of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The Heads of State and Government of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, the Niger and Nigeria adopted a declaration reaffirming their commitment to increase cooperation to safeguard Lake Chad and address the socioeconomic impact of climate change and instability. In his capacity as my High-level Representative for Nigeria, my Special Representative also held discussions with security institutions and other key stakeholders on the situation in the Lake Chad basin with a view to enhancing regional cooperation, reintegrating ex-combatants and dealing with root causes.

60. Through the facilitation of my Special Representatives for West Africa and the Sahel and for Central Africa, the governors of territories bordering Lake Chad met for the first time in Maiduguri, Nigeria on 8 and 9 May, and established the Lake Chad Basin Governors' Forum to enhance joint efforts towards building peace and fostering sustainable development across the Lake Chad basin.

Strategy for cross-border security in the Mano River Union

61. On 1 March, UNOWAS, ECOWAS and the Mano River Union met in Freetown to discuss cooperation and plan out joint activities. On 11 April, the Secretary-General of the Mano River Union met with my Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel in Dakar to discuss building the capacity of the Mano River Union's joint border security and confidence-building units, strengthening its women and

peace network and enhancing female political leadership and political participation, in the context of the cooperation framework between UNOWAS and the Mano River Union.

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

62. During the reporting period, the Regional Centre for Maritime Security in West Africa and the Multinational Maritime Coordination Centre continued to strengthen their operational capacities. My Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel continued to work with States to maintain their commitment to support the running costs of the centres. He also encouraged partners to better coordinate their maritime-security-related activities with ECOWAS and the Interregional Coordination Centre for maritime safety in the Gulf of Guinea within the framework of the Yaoundé maritime security architecture.

Drug trafficking and transnational organized crime

63. My Special Representative remained in close contact with relevant regional partners, particularly with regard to the framework of the implementation of the ECOWAS action plan on illicit drug trafficking, organized crime and drug abuse for the period 2016–2020.

64. From 7 to 9 January, ECOWAS, with the support of the United Nations, conducted a workshop to build the capacity of civil society organizations to prevent drug abuse. From 12 to 14 March, a subregional workshop held by UNODC brought together representatives from national administrations and judicial training schools for a training session on offences related to trafficking in persons. In addition, a transregional forum, organized in Algiers from 23 to 25 January by UNODC, set the framework for enhanced cooperation between countries in the Maghreb region and the Sahel in the fight against illicit trafficking and transnational organized crime.

D. Implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel

65. During the period under review, UNOWAS continued to advance the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel by providing support for the development of the United Nations support plan and bringing together United Nations entities and regional organizations, in particular the African Union, the Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel) and ECOWAS. As part of these efforts, on 21 March, I appointed Ibrahim Thiaw (Mauritania) as my Special Adviser for the Sahel to work closely with my Special Representative and the regional United Nations Development Group in implementing the strategy.

66. With a view to enhancing coherence, my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel participated in an informal meeting of special envoys and partners for the Sahel, hosted by Sweden on 24 and 25 January. Moreover, on 28 and 29 March, the Deputy Secretary-General, my Special Representative and my Special Adviser participated in a strategic consultative meeting on the Sahel in Nouakchott, organized by the African Union Commission, which explored ways to strengthen coherence among various Sahel initiatives. The Deputy Secretary-General called on regional actors to establish a working group for that purpose.

67. UNOWAS continued efforts to strengthen cooperation among national, regional and international actors on the Sahel. On 2 March, the Office co-chaired a regional United Nations Development Group meeting to discuss the implications of the conference on the Joint Force of the G-5 Sahel in Brussels on 22 and 23 February,

while harmonizing positions ahead of upcoming engagements with the G-5 Sahel. In N'Djamena, on 15 March, my Special Representative co-chaired the sixth meeting of the Ministerial Coordination Platform for the Sahel to advocate for ownership of the United Nations support plan by Sahel countries and regional actors. On 4 May, my Special Representative also chaired a meeting of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel steering committee in Dakar, which brought together the United Nations system at the regional and national levels to exchange views on emerging peace, humanitarian, development and security trends in the region. The committee welcomed the appointment of my Special Adviser for the Sahel. The United Nations support plan is in its final stages and will be presented to Member States soon.

68. UNOWAS continued to support the G-5 Sahel as a key regional partner through capacity-building activities and the facilitation of exchanges with United Nations entities in the Sahel. Two meetings took place between United Nations entities and the G-5 Sahel secretariat, in Nouakchott on 29 January and in N'Djamena on 13 March, respectively, to refine the framework for programmatic cooperation between the United Nations and the G-5 Sahel and to ensure synergies between the priority investment plan and the United Nations support plan. In Ouagadougou, on 26 and 27 April, UNOWAS and the G-5 Sahel secretariat organized, with the support of the Office of Counter-Terrorism, the second meeting of the ministers responsible for religious affairs of the G-5 Sahel countries, which took stock of the achievements of the Group's regional cell for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism and the national antenna offices set up with the support of UNOWAS.

E. Promotion of good governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights and gender mainstreaming

69. Throughout the reporting period, UNOWAS collaborated closely with human rights actors in the context of recent and upcoming elections. In Abidjan, on 26 and 27 March, UNOWAS organized a colloquium on challenges to and prospects for political reforms in West Africa, which was attended by approximately 70 representatives of institutions that are spearheading political reforms. The colloquium resulted in the creation of a platform for political reforms in West Africa and the Sahel. The secretariat of the platform will be hosted by UNOWAS. ECOWAS and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance have pledged financial support for the platform.

70. In a bid to enhance the overall role of national human rights institutions, UNOWAS, together with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ECOWAS and the West African members of the Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, organized a regional forum in Dakar from 12 to 14 April on electoral and political reform processes. Also in Dakar, on 22 March, UNOWAS convened a forum on adjudicating civil and political rights. In addition, on 17 April, my Special Representative met with the President of the Open Society Foundations to consider strengthening joint analyses and pursuing opportunities for advocacy during periods of increased tensions in countries of the subregion.

71. UNOWAS continued to promote the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions on women, youth and peace and security. On 10 and 11 April, UNOWAS and ECOWAS, with the support of the Office of Counter-Terrorism, co-hosted a high-level event on women, violence and terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel. The meeting adopted the Dakar Call for Action, which called on the States and Governments of West Africa and the Sahel to systematically involve women in all initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism and countering terrorism.

72. UNOWAS continued to work closely with the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel. The Office convened two subregional exchange sessions on women in security sector governance and conflict prevention on 12 March and on youth as victims of political manipulation on 3 May. National chapters of the Working Group discussed ways to foster dialogue between citizens and security services and enhance the capacity of women with regard to security sector reform processes. From 26 to 31 March, UNOWAS facilitated a Working Group mission to Côte d'Ivoire, during which the Working Group advocated for the adoption of a new national action plan on resolution 1325 (2000). On 29 January, UNOWAS participated in the launch of the Spotlight Initiative, which is a joint effort by the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate violence against women and girls.

IV. Observations and recommendations

73. While there were several positive developments in West Africa and the Sahel during the reporting period, many sources of instability remain, including deficits in governance and transversal threats, such as conflicts between herders and farmers. The prevalence of armed attacks by militant and extremist groups, and their negative consequences for development opportunities in the subregion, are a stark reminder of the inadequacy of current responses to address those challenges.

74. I commend the authorities in Burkina Faso and the Gambia for the progress made in reforming their security sectors. I encourage them to accelerate and consolidate those efforts and to enhance coherence and coordination among all partners. I also encourage the Gambian authorities to step up efforts to operationalize the commissions on human rights and on truth, reconciliation and reparations, and urge stakeholders to support those processes.

75. I welcome the peaceful democratic transition in Liberia and call on international partners to continue supporting the people and the Government of Liberia in consolidating peace, building resilience and achieving sustainable development while putting in place essential reforms. The closure of UNMIL continues the positive trend towards ending peace missions in the subregion. It also highlights the need for continuing United Nations support in order to consolidate the gains obtained over the past years and to sustain peace. United Nations transitions exemplify the need to identify more sustainable funding mechanisms for political capacities in United Nations non-mission settings and enhance support capacities at the level of regional offices.

76. I commend the people of Sierra Leone on the conduct of peaceful and credible elections and urge the Government to continue its collaboration with national stakeholders to boost national cohesion. I also commend the measures taken by the Government to bolster transparent and accountable governance as a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive development.

77. I welcome the continuing regional efforts aimed at assisting national stakeholders in Togo in overcoming their differences peacefully through dialogue and in line with the democratic aspirations of the Togolese people.

78. I note that, while technical processes related to voting on election days have improved across West Africa and the Sahel and have become less controversial, pre- and post-electoral phases remain challenging. I welcome the very close collaboration among the United Nations, regional partners and national institutions during recent elections in the subregion and reiterate the need to remain focused on overcoming those challenges in future electoral contests. I also call on authorities and

national stakeholders to work together to ensure a level playing field and help create an environment that is conducive to the preparation and holding of peaceful, inclusive and credible elections in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal.

79. While the spate of demonstrations in several countries highlights advances in freedoms of expression and assembly, they also indicate prevailing fundamental grievances. I wish to emphasize the critical need for and responsibility of Governments to provide effective and accountable governance in addressing the root causes of conflict, including by ensuring socioeconomic and political inclusion, in West Africa and the Sahel.

80. I note with concern the persistently low number of women in senior government positions in West Africa and the Sahel and urge countries in the subregion to take specific measures, in accordance with national and regional commitments, to enhance political opportunities for women and promote inclusive development. I also note with concern the role of women as both victims and perpetrators of extremist militancy. It is critical that we redouble our efforts to ensure women's full participation in the design and implementation of comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of that trend.

81. I am deeply concerned that in some parts of the Sahel the reach and control of Governments appear to be contracting rather than expanding, allowing space for extremist groups, often linked to transnational organized crime, to provide alternative livelihoods and protection for communities. I am particularly concerned about the closure of schools in affected areas in Burkina Faso and Mali, which is depriving the younger generations of their right to education.

82. Governance and development efforts must continue to be accompanied by a robust security response. I commend the efforts of the countries participating in the Multinational Joint Task Force and encourage strengthened partnership among the affected countries and with regional organizations, including the African Union. I am also pleased to note the continued efforts by members of the G-5 Sahel to enhance the operability of its Joint Force.

83. I underscore the need for all counter-insurgency efforts to be carried out in full compliance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, and to ensure that operations are aligned with and contribute to broader regional initiatives and do not harm the very populations they are intended to serve. I congratulate the Government of Nigeria for conducting trials of Boko Haram suspects and urge the acceleration of the reintegration of victims and other categories of individuals associated with extremist groups in all affected countries.

84. I encourage national authorities to provide critical humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities. In addition, I reiterate my call on the international community to increase political, humanitarian, logistical and financial assistance to the affected countries, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Joint Force of the G-5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force, and to advance the disbursement of pledged funds.

85. Driven by competition for land and water, rapid population growth, weak governance, ecological pressures and the circulation of small arms and light weapons, conflicts between pastoralists and farmers are becoming multidimensional threats that affect the entire subregion. I call on ECOWAS and its member States, with the support of the United Nations system and in consultation with affected communities, to find sustainable solutions to that challenge, implement national and regional protocols on transhumance and free movement, sensitize populations and States to those normative frameworks and identify long-term strategies, based on risk assessments, for curbing the impact of climate change in the subregion.

86. I welcome the conclusions of the International Conference on Lake Chad and call for the urgent implementation of measures to address the drastic shrinking of Lake Chad and revitalize the ecosystem of the Lake Chad basin, which is the epicentre of socioeconomic activity for more than 45 million people in the region.

87. I am pleased with the collective efforts being made by the United Nations system, under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary-General, towards recalibrating the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel in order to expedite its impact, including through the development of the United Nations support plan, the mobilization of additional resources and the provision of support to the countries in the subregion.

88. I welcome the commitment expressed by the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria to completing the demarcation of the land and maritime boundaries shared by the two countries. I encourage the parties to renew their efforts to resolve any residual differences of interpretation of selected provisions in the judgment of the International Court of Justice of 10 October 2002, with a view to accelerating the completion of the mandate of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission.

89. I wish to express my appreciation to the Governments of West Africa and the Sahel region, the African Union, ECOWAS, the G-5 Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Gulf of Guinea Commission and the Lake Chad Basin Commission for their continued cooperation with UNOWAS. I also extend my appreciation to the United Nations system in West Africa and the Sahel, civil society organizations and other institutions for their close partnership with UNOWAS. I commend and further encourage the close collaboration between UNOCA and UNOWAS on an increasing range of topical and transversal challenges that reflects and responds proactively to the enhanced cooperation between ECCAS and ECOWAS. I would like to express particular appreciation to my Special Representative and my Special Adviser, as well as the staff of UNOWAS and the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, for their continuing efforts to advance peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel.